

Responses to Professors Pekarsky, Yob, and Brown

Israel Scheffler
Harvard University

First, let me express my warm thanks to Professors Pekarsky, Yob, and Brown for their comments on my book. I am grateful for their critical as well as their appreciative reactions and I will try, in the following remarks, to respond to some of the questions they have raised, after I say something about the book itself.

No voice is wholly lost -- so it has been said. This is, I fear, an optimistic exaggeration. With the passage of time and the change of the generations, most of the voices of the past inevitably fade, until at last even their faint echoes are heard no more. But many persist -- the voices of departed parents or relatives, important teachers and old friends; and they arise and speak spontaneously in the mind in quiet or apposite moments. "I can still hear my mother (or my grandmother) saying..." we may remark. Other voices are implicit in memory, stored in a deeper layer; they need to be sought out and bidden to speak.

My book is an effort to revisit teachers of my youth, and to urge them to hold forth once again. I wanted the pleasure of their long lost company; I longed to hear their lessons anew, to profit from their advice, and to observe, with maturer eyes, how they taught and what they imparted to their pupils.

The teachers of Jewish subjects whom I recall belonged, along with my parents, to a generation of immigrants

who brought their religious and cultural treasures from the Old World to the New, guarding them as dearer than life itself and laboring to hand them on to their children... In leaving the Old World, they were cut loose from communicative ties with the culture in which they had been reared. Giving us whatever they had in the way of the spirit, they could not alter the fact that our communicative routes would be formed in America, along paths they could never travel. In this respect, too, I felt the urge to carry through my project, overcoming their cultural isolation by remembering them and interpreting what they did in terms that our children and others might grasp. This work of memory and interpretation would, I hoped, go at least some way toward overcoming the discontinuity between the generations -- re-establishing, in some forms at least, the links disrupted by immigration, and helping to preserve the treasures of the immigrant generation for their own intrinsic value.¹

My book is inevitably autobiographical, but its aim is not to provide an autobiography -- focusing outward, as it does, on my teachers, and aiming to bring to life their modes of teaching, and the environments within which they taught. Nor, despite the religious content of their teaching, is the point of the book to offer a philosophy of religion or of religious education. This explains why I am afraid I disappointed Professor Yob's expectation to find some root metaphors offering a philosophical grasp of Jewish religious practice or religious education as a whole, and why she apparently got more detail about my educational experience than she bargained for.

The detail had another function, beyond the purely descriptive, and this had to do with my process of recall, which Professor Pekarsky describes as "uncanny." It may, in fact, seem strange now to have been able to remember so much over such a long period of time, to have been able to seek out the voices of the long vanished past, and to bid them speak once again. The fact is, I had no idea,

before writing the book, that I would be able to recall what I did, nor did I have any inkling of the range of incidents my memory held.

I was continually being surprised, in the course of my writing, by long-lost memories flooding back, each wave pursuing the wave preceding it. I did not, in fact, bid these flood-borne voices speak. Rather, called forth by what had just preceded them, they bade me listen. And it was, for me at least, typically the sensory detail, put down in writing, that served to open the flood-gates: thus Mr. Savage's gold watch chain, the lurching of the elevated train, the aroma of hot chestnuts on Henry Street, even Rabbi Shunfenthal's daily lunch.

When early readers of my manuscript would tell me that *they*, at any rate, could not recall *their* teachers, I would tell them that they were in no position to say beforehand what they could and could not recall. "What did you have for lunch on a typical school-day?" I would ask. "What did the lunchroom look like?" "What did your teachers wear?" Thus challenged, my interlocutors would begin to describe what they had not anticipated a moment earlier. I now recommend the same experiment to you, and I promise a unique pleasure of discovery.

Professor Yob raises large questions as to the relation between the religious and the secular worlds. She speaks of religious *studies* as well as of *religion* -- which is, of course, an altogether different matter. Certainly, I agree with her that school curricula ought to be enriched by the *study of religions*, pursued in an open spirit of critical inquiry. And I hold that such study is likely to repay us with new categories of description and delineation, of comparison and classification, that extend rather than rival those available in the secular world.

I have, in this vein, written that

the categories available in the separate sciences, in politics, in technology and the professions do not exhaust those that are possible to us, and in particular do not take the place of those available in the rich symbolic traditions of religion, literature and the arts. These traditions are important not because they report on another world but because, and to the extent that, they give us a new purchase on this...To live in the presence of ultimate questions, whether of religion or philosophy, is to live a different life, here and now (p. 178).

To have made one's own a complex and subtle lexicon that incorporates categories such as justice, compassion, holiness, truth, duty, conscience, is to have acquired a particular character.

Professor Brown points out the difficulties of Jewish education in sustaining cultural loyalties into adulthood and, thus, ensuring Jewish continuity. He endorses my call for a philosophical "rethinking, by Jewish educators, of the bases of Jewish life and learning in our times." Moreover, he makes the intriguing suggestion that what may appear to be a problem peculiar to Jewish education in America, is indeed a problem confronting American education at large, plagued by what he describes as "pursuit of the narrowest of educational goals" and "devoid of any philosophic orientation" that "might give it life and meaning." The meaning of laws as well as texts, he says, "devolves from continuous examination of them, from exploration of their possibilities in light of our collective values, understandings, and commitments." I could not agree more on the universal importance of philosophy for any form of educational enterprise, to keep alive our sense of purpose, to broaden our range of vision, and to focus a critical eye on the rationale for our inherited practices.

Professor Pekarsky notes as one of the morals of my book that one "should not assume any straightforward relationship between teacher quality as ordinarily understood and effectiveness." I should, indeed, want to question what are often taken as criteria of good teaching. The apparent indifference of Mr. G., the geometry teacher described in my book, was, for example, an unusual instance of educational restraint which goes against the assumption of the teacher's need to be in control and to be constantly talking. His apparent indifference threw us back on our own resources, directed our energies toward the subject matter rather than himself and, in the event, turned out

wildly successful. One benefit of the effort to recall details of one's own educational experiences is, I believe, that it thus provokes the questioning of prevailing criteria of educational practice.

Professor Pekarsky raises an important general question: How can education "take us or point us beyond the status quo," dependent as it is on the very status quo for support? If, as he says, "educational institutions require the active support of their communities, how will such support be forthcoming if the school is educating toward an ideal that goes beyond the community's attitudes?" In effect, the question is: How is educational change possible if the leverage for change depends on a future that presupposes the very change in question?

My answer is that the leverage for change does not, in fact, presuppose the change in question. It presupposes only the vision of change, that is the understanding that change is needed, the willingness to work toward it, and objective conditions that favor such work. It requires, in other words, the operation of an intelligence that, rising above current conditions and assessing imagined futures, can direct present energies toward a preferred set of these futures. Educational institutions require the support of their communities, but such support does not imprison the imagination nor preclude the operation of a directive intelligence. Nor does it rule out the possibility that such intelligence may provoke new community realizations and, thus, help to create new realities. Educators need continually, in fact, to educate communities for change while they manage the very institutions requiring change. To help educators in this task is one of the main purposes of philosophical thinking in the sphere of education.

1. Israel Scheffler, *Teachers of My Youth* (Boston: Kluwer, 1995), 9. This book will be referred to by page numbers in the text for all subsequent citations.